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The gift of food and the utility of student feedback

Professor Maggie Bartlett

983 words

It is not often that snacks feature in medical education literature. In a recent search of articles published in this journal, for example, I could only find one in the past 50 years¹. In this issue Hessler et al² report on their use of cookies as a vehicle for delivering chocolate to medical students, combining a very human approach with the rigor of a randomised controlled trial to test the utility of students' feedback on teaching.

Over recent decades, much work has been undertaken to explore the question of what influences students' evaluations of teaching and how their learning is correlated with their ratings of the teacher or the session. Many factors have been identified, associated variously with the students themselves and their individual and unique constructions of their experiences, the teachers (both their innate characteristics and their teaching behaviour), the content and timing of sessions, and the nature of the subjects being taught.

It is clear that feedback from students is powerful, both for individual teachers and for faculty^{3,4,5}, and teachers modify their behaviour to try to influence it as it is bound up with both their identity and faculty decision-making. Some do this by adding in extra educational activities, others by changes to their grading stringency or by offering snacks or other inducements during teaching sessions. Some do these things even though they believe them to be 'unethical and deserving of punishment'⁵ which demonstrates how important the feedback is perceived to be. Interestingly, researchers have generally failed to demonstrate a clear relationship between students' evaluations and educational outcomes^{4,6} or the educational value of what teachers do to attempt to influence the feedback^{4,5}.

With regard to Hessler et al's work¹, it is worth considering why the chocolate cookies influenced the feedback so significantly. Simpson and Sigauw⁵ note that pizza is often provided as a similar inducement. This may be no coincidence; both chocolate and pizza have been posited as addictive foodstuffs because of their combination of highly refined, rapidly absorbed carbohydrates and fat with concomitant 'high levels of reward' linked to dopamine pathways⁷. The same is true of cake, another commonly offered food gift in teaching sessions. So there is reason to believe that the gift of a T shirt or a coffee mug, or kale and celery¹ might not have the same effect as the chocolate cookies; a gift is a gift, but food is fundamental, and chocolate and pizza are specifically beguiling.

As well as the physiological effects of specific items offered to students, we should consider the socio-cultural aspects of gifts of food in general. Sharing food, a precious resource and a crucial commodity, is often a sign of acceptance into a social group and the beginning of relationship building⁸. There are complex social constructions about the refusal of offered food, which can be interpreted as a sign of hostility. When unequal relationships are involved this becomes a quagmire which many people would try to avoid by accepting what is offered even if they don't want or need it. Powerful feelings of reciprocity arise as the hospitable provision of food is a profoundly symbolic human activity; it can be a welcome into a home or a community enacted in a very basic demonstration of care. I recently supervised an MA student's work which looked at how students and faculty define the 'enthusiasm' of their clinical tutors which is commonly included in student feedback surveys as an important aspect of quality of teaching. While the participants rarely used the words 'care' or 'caring', the attributes they included as indicative of enthusiasm suggested that they valued the care taken by tutors to be well prepared for teaching in terms of knowledge of the programme and the care they gave in terms of individually tailored support⁹. I wonder if the perceived provision of care is at the root of the matter.

Hessler et al's paper² adds to the ample evidence which undermines the widespread practice of basing decisions about faculty or course content on students' feedback on teaching, as well as its validity and reliability as an outcome measure in medical education research.

Could this paper, with its clear evidence that when faculty provide chocolate cookies students give better feedback both on the process of teaching and on the quality of teaching materials, result in tutors routinely providing unhealthy snacks during teaching sessions? Given that it is socially awkward to refuse gifts of food, and the foods on offer involve health risks, what effect would it have on the future health of the medical workforce? Is it worth taking these risks in order to go along with the heavy reliance that our institutions and our research place on student feedback which we increasingly know to be flawed as a measure of teaching?

What are the alternatives? Direct observation of teaching would seem a more robust method, but it is costly, stressful for the observed, does not take into account the views of students as consumers and may be given less weight than student feedback⁵. Triangulation of data from multiple sources, including goal oriented appraisal, is important, but complex and not often done. Interviews and focus groups could be less open to bias, but are logistically challenging, and again, costly. Maybe we should stop using 'end of session' forms which are especially vulnerable to teacher influence, instead seeking delayed opinions which might be less vulnerable, though with the risk of a lower response rate.

Well-constructed surveys of student opinion are necessary but students will continue to be influenced by non-educational teacher characteristics and some teachers will continue to try to influence their ratings by doing things which do not have an educational benefit.

Maybe we should ban gifts of food from teaching sessions. This still leaves the issue of students seeking revenge on teachers they perceive as demanding⁵ and the influences of gender, attractiveness, leniency and charisma of the teacher^{4,5}, ...chocolate, anyone?

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5 points to pull out

Student's feedback on teaching is powerful both for individual teachers and for faculty

Researchers have generally failed to demonstrate a clear relationship between students' evaluations and educational outcomes or the educational value of what teachers do to attempt to influence the feedback

The hospitable provision of food is a profoundly symbolic human activity; it can be a welcome into a home or a community enacted in a very basic demonstration of care

A gift is a gift, but food is fundamental, and chocolate and pizza are specifically beguiling

Triangulation of data from multiple sources, including goal oriented appraisal, is important but complex and not often done